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Conformity and Digression: Change of Narrative in a Chinese Peasant's Personal Writing

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Conformity and Digression: Change of Narrative in a Chinese Peasant's Personal
Writing

A Thesis Presented

By

DANPING WANG

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

CONFORMITY AND DIGRESSION: CHANGE OF NARRATIVE IN A CHINESE PEASANT'S PERSONAL WRITING

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Rural China has gone through dramatic transformation from the Mao era to the post-Mao era. China scholars have been studying the institutional changes closely in the past few decades. However, Chinese peasants' living experience and their memory and understanding of the past have not yet received enough attention and discussion. By examining personal writings of a peasant named Luo Xuechang in Jiande, Zhejiang province, this paper discusses the complex interactions between the state and the individual. This paper attempts to unfold the juxtaposition of state narratives and personal narratives embedded in Luo's unpublished memoir, almanacs from 1972 to 1980, notebooks and other personal writings. By focusing on Luo's writings on his family life, education, work and political perspectives, this paper reveals how Luo altered his personal narratives over time and how Luo carefully conformed with and digressed from state-produced national narratives to make sense of his own history.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1972, a peasant in Zhejiang province named Luo Xuechang started keeping a record of his daily life. In a little pocket almanac book (*lishu*, 历书) distributed by the state to disseminate ideology and scientific knowledge, he wrote down his daily schedule, usually in a few words such as: January 1, 1972, “rested at home due to a cold;” January 2, 1972, “took over a class for an absent teacher;” January 3, 1972, “same as yesterday.” Three decades later Luo turned what he had recorded in the almanacs into a personal memoir, where he reflected not only on his own life but also on his observation of social and political changes.

Historian Yoshifumi Sato and his team found Luo’s unpublished memoir during an interview with him in the summer of 2015.¹ According to the interview and Luo’s memoir, he was born in a small mountain village named Luo Village in Zhejiang province in 1940. His father was once a medical practitioner, having his own pharmacy until it was demolished by the Nationalist Party during the civil war. After the pharmacy was demolished, Luo’s father moved to Getang village where Luo’s grandmother resided. Because of his literacy, Luo’s father participated in land-reform in Getang village. His family was identified as poor peasant, while his grandmother was classified as a landlord. His father was later classified as a “bad element” for press-ganging villagers from Luo village before 1949. He was dragged back to Luo village to be openly denounced and criticized and was under surveillance for a year. Because of the “bad element” title, Luo’s family “lived a miserable life.”

¹ The interview was conducted as a part of Professor Yoshifumi Sato’s research project on forestry in Zhejiang province in the twentieth century. I worked as research assistant for Yoshifumi Sato in this project. Our group was introduced to Li Xuechang by Zhang Rongsheng, a former interviewee and also a cohort of Luo in Jiande Primary Forestry School from 1959 to 1960. This memoir will be published in Chinese in Japan next year.

Luo quit middle school due to poverty at the age of fourteen. Nevertheless, the education he received was more than what most peasants had at that time. He managed to enroll in Jiande Primary School of Forestry in 1959 and passed every subject with high scores. In 1960, Luo and all of his classmates were dismissed from the school and sent back to their own production teams as a response to the policy of focusing on agricultural and food production during the three-year famine. He married Chu Yunxian in 1961 and built their house in 1966. In 1973 Yunxian became ill; she passed away two years later, leaving Luo alone with three children (the eldest daughter was 12 years old, the son was 8 years old and the youngest daughter was only 5 years old). Luo worked as brigade accountant during the collectivization period. After the abolition of the collective system in his village in 1982, Luo worked many jobs, such as accountant for local grain supply center, owner of a small veterinary drug shop, and cleaning worker as well. Because he took special pleasure in his penmanship and calligraphy, he also used his leisure time to serve people in his community, helping them to write letters and New Year scrolls, and sometimes contracts or agreements. He started writing his memoir after he stopped working in 2009 and in 2015, he began compiling a genealogy for Luo family.

Luo carefully kept many of his personal writings including his memoir, his family genealogy, the almanacs², several notebooks, letters to Chu Yunxian from 1959 to 1960, several articles in remembrance of his mother, work notes, an unfinished short history of Luo village and numerous couplets he penned.

Among them, the almanacs, the notebooks and the memoir are of great importance to this study for three reasons. First, these documents represent three

² Luo kept almanacs from 1972 to 1982, 1992 to 1994, 2001 to 2014.

different types of personal writing and each of these forms needs our close attention. Secondly, written at different times, these writings offer us a chance to trace the transformation process of an individual's mind. Finally and most importantly, the juxtaposition of national and personal narratives in all these documents facilitate better understanding of the interaction between the state and the individual. The life story of Luo Xuechang presented in his personal writings is what Gail Hershatter would call a "good-enough story." As she explains in her study of gendered memory in socialist China, a good-enough story "surprises and engenders thought, unspooling in different directions depending on which thread the listener picks up," and is "available to reinterpretation" and ready to be "woven into many larger narratives."³

This paper will delve into Luo Xuechang's life with special attention to the change of narratives over time and the complex interactions between the state and the individual. Luo's personal history offers a different perspective from "History," which Prasenjit Duara identifies as the history of nation-state.⁴ While "History narratives and language appropriate dispersed histories according to present needs" and thus decide "which people and cultures belonged to the time of History and who and what had to be eliminated,"⁵ dispersed historical actors like Luo also appropriate History narratives as filling pieces to construct their own history. Moreover, as Matthew Johnson argues, even though Chinese people encountered pervasive propaganda in the socialist era, it was still impossible for the state to establish a single unified national voice. Instead, people had their own voice and created alternative or even counter

³ Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

⁴ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

⁵ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 5.

narratives to suit their own agendas.⁶ At the same time, as warned by Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, we should not “romanticize resistance by presuming that a desire to fight back against instituted power is natural, inevitable, or even the most interesting aspect of social life.”⁷ While it is tempting to see the history through the analytical framework of resistance, it omits the situation where the individual works with the state and uses the state to define personal identity and give meaning to personal experience.

In this paper, I will make two arguments. First of all, as we can tell from Luo’s writings, his personal understanding of some issues and the stories he tells have changed remarkably over time. The challenge is not to figure out what narrative stands for the truth (since they all represent the “truth” under a specific circumstance), but to keep track of what brings about the changes in the interpretations. My second argument is that Luo produced an individualized and unique history of the Mao era and the post-Mao era by carefully conforming with and digressing from the changing national narratives, and that not all digressions should be seen as opposition or resistance.

The first part of this paper will provide a detailed introduction to the almanacs, the notebooks and the memoir, not only to expose readers to the different texture of these documents, but also to demonstrate the intricate juxtapositions of the state and the personal narratives. The following sections will focus on the content of Luo’s personal writing, especially the changes in his narrative over time, and analyze the

⁶ Matthew D. Johnson, “Beneath the Propaganda State: Official and Unofficial Cultural Landscapes in Shanghai, 1949-1965,” in *Maoism at the Grassroots*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 199-201.

⁷ Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, “Biopolitical Beijing: Pleasure, Sovereignty, and Self-Cultivation in China’s Capital,” *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no.3 (2005), 303-327.

way Luo appropriated national narratives to make sense of his own history.

Examining Luo's writings on his family life, his education, work, and political perspectives, this paper will reveal how Luo's individual narratives altered over time and how they conformed with and digressed from state-produced national narratives.

CHAPTER I

MEDIA

The collective era was known as a time when the state greatly extended its reach to rural China. But how did “the state” transform from an external and remote concept to a living truth? As warned by Gail Hershatter, we should not take the state for granted and we should explore “its contingency, its unevenness, the many kinds of incessant human labor and workaday practices required to make it seem natural and perduring.”⁸ By taking the almanacs, the notebooks and the memoir seriously from a material culture perspective, this chapter attempts to unveil the fussy process of the familiarization and the substantiation of the concept of the state and the entanglement between the national and the personal narratives embedded in all three types of sources. I argue that by using and writing on these materials, individuals familiarize themselves with the concept of the state, partly internalize it, and express it as a part of their own identities.

The Almanacs

Almanacs have long been important to Chinese people, especially to peasants who engage closely with the land and the environment. In late imperial China, almanacs were composed of both astronomical and astrological information.⁹ During the Republican era, the government considered the astrological aspect “superstitious”, and thus had it removed. Immediately after the PRC was founded in 1949, the state started to work on the production of almanacs. In 1950, the state-owned People’s Press (*Renmin chubanshe*, 人民出版社) began reforming the content and the format

⁸ Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 9

⁹ Richard J. Smith, *Chinese Almanacs* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2.

of almanacs, getting rid of content considered “superstitious” and adding political propaganda and scientific knowledge, especially about agriculture and hygiene.¹⁰ Beginning in 1951, provincial-level presses were permitted to produce their own almanacs. According to the General Administration of Press and Publication, the content related to scientific knowledge and production knowledge in the new almanacs could be chosen by published by the provincial-level presses, whereas the content related to political ideology in the new almanacs must be decided by Beijing People’s Press (*Beijing Renmin Chubanshe*, 北京人民出版社). During the collective era, rural supply and marketing cooperatives served as the channel where peasants could buy almanacs and other popular books. According to an article in *People’s Daily*, there were over 10,000 cooperatives that sold books in 1964, and one-third or even half of almanacs were distributed in this way.¹¹

While folk collectors in China have noticed the importance of the almanacs published in the PRC period in the past few years, PRC scholars have not yet paid enough attention to the Almanacs.¹² Almanacs were one of the most popular types of books in rural China under the collective system. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the state even forced peasants to buy books including the almanacs.¹³ As we can tell from the following chart, the publication number increased substantially after 1966.

¹⁰ “Chuban Dongtai (*Publication Trends*),” *Ren Min Ri Bao*, January 21, 1951.

¹¹ “Chuanbo Xin Sixiang, Tuiguang Xin Jishu, Wei Nongcun Duzhe Fuwu, Gongxiashe Jiji Xiang Nongcun Gongying Tushu,” *Ren Min Ri Bao*, September 10, 1964.

¹² There are several folk collectors who have collected over a thousand almanacs published all over China since the establishment of the PRC. And there are a huge number of different almanacs being sold at kongfz.com.

¹³ See Li Hanji’s “Zhongdian Faxing yu Qiangxing Tanpai: Zhonggong Jianguo Chuqi Chuban Zhengce Yanjiu.”

Table 1: Publication Number of the Almanacs From 1965 to 1980.

Year of Publication	Number of Publication
1965	450,000
1966	450,000
1967	1,100,000
1968	1,120,000
1969	1,000,000
1970	NA
1971	NA
1972	NA
1973	NA
1974	1,500,000
1975	2,030,000
1976	2,460,000
1977	3,070,000
1978	3,500,000
1979	4,150,000
1980	3,976,000

Studying the almanacs published in the PRC period from a material culture perspective not only enables us to track the historical changes from the Mao era to the post-Mao era, it also exposes us to the practice of keeping notes in the almanacs and thus sheds light on the relationship between the state and the individual. I will examine the almanacs published in Zhejiang province from 1956 to 1996 as artifacts, focusing specially on the physical nature including their publisher, size, and design.¹⁴ To do so, I examine Luo's almanacs and other almanacs published in Zhejiang province.¹⁵

The earliest almanac in Zhejiang province which I can find was published in 1956. From 1956 to 1964, the almanacs (32K, 136mm x 197mm) were published by

¹⁴ I am inspired by Catherine Anne Wilson's paper "The Farm Diary: An Intimate and Ongoing Relationship between Artifact and Keeper." to take Luo's writing as material culture.

¹⁵ I found numbers of other almanacs published in Zhejiang province in the Chinese online used bookstore kongfz.com.

Zhejiang People's Press(*Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe*, 浙江人民出版社). In 1965, Zhejiang People's Press changed the size of the almanac from 32K to 64K (98mm x 136mm) and kept publishing the almanac until 1980.¹⁶ Zhejiang Science and Technology Publishing House started publishing the almanacs after its founding in 1980.

The cover of the almanacs are always bright-colored. The design of the cover suggests a distinct feature of its time. For example, during the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, the publisher chose the image of Mao Zedong and Lin Biao as the cover. Since the beginning of the Reform Era, publishers stopped using any political image on the almanac covers and used traditional Chinese New Year prints instead.

From 1972 to 1980, Li recorded his activities in almanacs produced by Zhejiang People's Press. The almanacs were composed of five parts: the first part provided propaganda including quotations from Chairman Mao, revolutionary articles, and reports of the National Congress of the Communist Party of China; the second part presented both the Christian-Gregorian calendar and the Chinese lunar calendar; right next to the calendar was space intentionally left blank for people to record daily activities; the fourth part provided agricultural knowledge, including basic climate information, guidance on what and how to grow crops in different months, and the introduction of high-yield crops and agricultural chemicals including chemical fertilizers; and the last part offered general knowledge such as mathematical methods to calculate volume, a list of dynasties, cures for several common diseases and birth control methods.

¹⁶ Although Zhejiang People's Press started publishing almanacs in 64K size in 1965, it kept publishing almanacs in 32K size at the same time for another two years.

The design of having a blank space right next to the date is similar to the design of a daily planner nowadays. However, different from daily planners, where people plan their forthcoming schedules, the blank space in the almanacs was designed to let people keep track of their daily lives, as suggested by the phrase “keep a record of events” above the blank space. The way Luo used the almanac requires our special attention. As we see from the following image, a page from the 1972 almanac, Luo noted down his and Yunxian’s daily schedule. Whenever they worked for the brigade, Luo would draw a circle to the right of the column; Whenever they rested at home or only took care of their household affairs, Luo would draw a line instead; If he only worked half a day for the brigade, he would draw a circle with a line and if both of he and Yunxian worked for the brigade that day, he would draw two circles. On the top of every two pages, he would note down the number of work they had done for the brigade that month. For example, in April 1972, he and Yunxian worked 23 days in total and earned 23 gong (工).

Figure 1: Almanac Entries in April 1972.



Luo is not the only person who used almanacs this way. Lin Fazhang, another peasant in Jiande and a former classmate of Luo, also recorded his daily tasks and the total number of working days in the almanacs.¹⁷ Other available almanacs display similar practices. Work points were extremely important to the annual household income in rural China in the collective era.¹⁸ The amount of cash a family could earn was solely based on the work points while 15% of the food distribution depended on the work points. There were three different types of practices of calculating the work points under the collective system. One is known as time rates, which means team members would be classified into different labor grade based on their age, sex, physical strength and skills. And their labor would be credited according to their working hours. Another common practice is called piece rates, which means work points would be calculated based on the quantity of the end products. Apart from that, during the Cultural Revolution and the campaign to learn from Dazhai, the Dazhai-Style work point system was the most popular. Under this system, work points were calculated according to the number of days team members had worked and their “basic work point” which depended on their self-evaluation of their work, other members’ appraisal and their political attitude. As we can tell from Luo’s almanacs, Luo village adopted the Dazhai system in the 1970s. According to Luo’s memoir, team members would gather together to calculate work points and Luo was in charge of keeping track of team members’ work points. Due to the importance of the work points, it was crucial and beneficial for team members to write down their tasks and

¹⁷ We interviewed Lin Fazhang in 2013 and found out the almanacs and the brigade account books of Xiwu No. 1 Village in Jiande, Zhejiang province from 1961 to 1982.

¹⁸ For study of the work points and the distribution system in socialist China, see Li Huaiyin’s *Village China under Socialism and Reform*, and Zhang Letian, *Farewell Utopia: A Study on the People’s Commune System (Gaobie Lixiang: Renmin Gongshe Zhidu Yanjiu)*.

the number of working days in the almanacs as their own records should any dispute arise.

Luo’s almanacs are particularly interesting because of the later appearance in Luo’s memoir. His memoir is full of vivid details of events, including specific dates and times. By the time he started to write the memoir, Luo was already in his sixties and he could not have presented such a detailed account without resorting to the records in the almanacs. Taking his writing of his wife Yunxian’s sickness and death as an example, the details in the memoir matched the entries in his almanacs. He wrote in the memoir, “On December 10th 1973, Yunxian went to Getang (a nearby village) to get some herbs to eat; on December 19th, she was seriously ill; on December 20th, we went to Fuchunjiang Employees’ Hospital and went back home by bus that day, and Yunxian didn’t get better even after taking medicines for 16 days. On January 8th, we went to Jiande Second Hospital and hospitalized her. She was diagnosed with rheumatism, pneumonia, and nephritis. Yunxian was severely ill on the 15th and I was not allowed to leave the hospital. Since it was such a serious illness that it could not be cured immediately and also because of our financial difficulties, we left the hospital in February 1974.”

Below are the entries in his almanacs from December 10th 1973 to February 15th 1974 (we are missing the almanac pages from January 16th 1974 to January 31st 1974).

Table 2: Entries in Luo’s Almanacs from December 10th 1973 to February 15th 1974 (continued onto next page).

December 10th	plowed the land for tea growing, Yunxian was out	<input type="radio"/>
December 11th	plowed the land for tea growing	<input type="radio"/>

December 12th	accompanied Derong to Wangfangyuan	/
December 13th	plowed the land for tea growing, Derong was back	○
December 14th	carried 10 jin bamboos in the morning, plowed the land for tea growing in the afternoon	○
December 15th	plowed the land for tea growing	○
December 16th	plowed the land for tea growing	○
December 17th	plowed the land for tea growing, old uncle was back	○
December 18th	plowed the land for tea growing	○
December 19th	went to visit Yunxian in Getang	/
December 20th	went to Fuchunjiang in the morning, went back home in the afternoon	/
December 21st		
December 22nd		
December 23rd		
December 24th		
December 25th		
December 26th		
December 27th		
December 28th		
December 29th		
December 30th		
December 31st		
January 1st		
January 2nd		
January 3rd		
January 4th		
January 5th		
January 6th		
January 7th		

January 8th	accompanied Yunxian to hospitalize her in Meicheng	
January 9th		
January 10th		
January 11th		
January 12th		
January 13th		
January 14th	Yunxian had heart attack during the night	
January 15th	went to Meicheng	
February 1st	paid the medical bill 41.09 RMB	
February 2nd	left hospital in the afternoon and went to Peijiawu to see doctor	
February 3rd	went back home	
February 4th		
February 5th	Xu went back home	
February 6th		
February 7th		
February 8th	went to Getang, went to Miaoqian Xiawulong in the afternoon	
February 9th	in Getang	
February 10th	went back home	
February 11th		
February 12th		
February 13th		
February 14th	accompanied Yunxian to Meicheng to see doctor	
February 15th	went back home	

Apart from regarding the almanacs merely as sources of information for the memoir, we should also pay attention to the juxtaposition of state narrative and personal narrative in the almanacs. As we learn from the marks Luo made in the margins of the 1994 almanac, he did read the content. And the interesting

juxtaposition of state narratives and personal life record in the almanacs adds complexity to our understanding of the interactions between the state and the individual. The state combined political propaganda with scientific knowledge in the almanacs, a medium which was widely accessed by the general public. The design of having a blank space in the almanacs further encouraged people to use the almanacs on a daily basis. Although it is unclear whether Luo specifically used the almanacs as an ideological source in writing his memoir (since the ideology promoted in the almanacs was consistent with the state narrative Luo would have learned at school and in brigade meetings), he did interact with the state ideology in his writing, either conforming with it or making digressions from it.

The Notebooks

Yoshifumi Sato and his team collected sixteen of Luo's notebooks in 2015 and 2016. Among these sixteen notebooks, five are account books documenting money and gifts received for the weddings of his three children in 1982 and 1990, the funeral of his father in 1991 and the funeral of his mother in 2002. Seven are work notes and minutes of commune meetings and brigade meetings. Three are account books and one of them served as an almanacs for 2007 to 2012 as well. The last notebook contains his random writings over time and passage extracts.

Most of the notebooks which Luo used to take work notes and write meeting minutes were distributed by Jiande county government in 1980, 1990 and 2000 due to Luo's participation in the national census or issuing national ID cards. The notebooks distributed by the government use brown craft paper as their covers, and are either named Work Notes or Study and Work. On the bottom of the covers printed "Jiande County Qintang Village People's Government." Those notebooks which Luo used as

account books for money and gifts (except for the one about the funeral of his mother in 2002) are exercise books used in school. Luo worked as a substitute teacher in local primary school in the 1970s and in 1988, and that explains the source of these notebooks. Among the sixteen notebooks, three are hardcovers (72K, 136mm x 85mm) and one of them was a farewell gift from a former classmate. Each hardcover has a title; one from a former classmate as a farewell gift is titled “Youth” (*qingchun*, 青春); One is titled “Hundred Flowers” (*baihua*, 百花) and the another is called “Peony.” Luo used notebook “Youth” to keep record of his debt due to Yunxian’s illness in the 1970s. In notebook “Hundred Flowers” he took detailed notes of various commune meetings and brigade meetings from 1981 to 1982 on the issue of the implementation of the “household contract responsibility system” (*jiating lianchan chengbao zhi*, 家庭联产承包制) and the redistribution of public property.

“Peony” requires particular attention for this study. Different from other notebooks which served either as account books or work logs, “Peony” was not only a repository for Luo’s activities, but also a kind of companion for Luo where he enjoyed the freedom and privacy to express his most intimate feelings. “Peony” is a hundred-page hardcover using printing paper made in China and has a burgundy cover with four peonies on it. Inside this notebook are three pictures of scenic spots. Although the notebook did not specify where these scenic spots were, we can infer from the pictures that these were taken in Zhejiang province, presumably in Hangzhou around West Lake. Where Luo obtained this notebook and how much he paid for it is untraceable. However, judging from the quality of the paper and the design, it must have been one of the best Luo ever possessed. Therefore, it came as no surprise that

Luo treated this notebook carefully and used it to keep intimate writings.

This notebook is a collage of numerous extracted proverbs and passages, Luo's personal writings at different time (the earliest dated back to 1960 and the latest was written in 1979) and his notes taken back in the forestry school. "Peony" is unique in the organization of the content. Different from diaries, most of the entries in this notebook do not have a specific date. To make it more confusing, the few entries which do have a date are not arranged in chronological order. For example Luo's poem about the CCP written in 1979 is followed by notes taken in the forestry school in May 1960. A few pages later, it jumps back to another poem written in 1979.

Confusing as "Peony" is, it nevertheless allows us to see the process of transforming the state from an imaginary concept to a real entity. For example, Luo wrote a short passage in 1979 to praise the CCP. As he wrote, "The CCP is wise and brilliant. It organizes poor people together. There is an old saying that a leading horse that stops at a crossroads makes all other horses ignorant of where to go(一马不行百马忧). Now with the leadership of the CCP, a household that faces difficulties will be helped by all other households(一家有难百家救)." He continued, "Disasters struck me one after another. It is the CCP who saved me. I had so much profound experience and I truly appreciate what the CCP has done to me." The praise for the CCP in the notebook suggests that for Luo, the state and the Party were not just remote concepts, but his living truth. His wife, Yunxian, was diagnosed with severe nephropathy in 1973. The money Luo borrowed from the team and the brigade enabled him to seek medical help for her. After Yunxian's death in 1975, Luo had to take care of his three young children by himself while still having to earn work points in the team. He

extended his appreciation towards his team cadres' consideration in allowing him to stay at home to cook lunch for his children in the morning and only work in the afternoon. For him, help from his team and brigade equated to the help from the state and the Party and in this way Luo substantiated the concept of the state.

The boundary between the state-promoted ideology and Luo's personal writing is sometimes blurry in this notebook. In most cases, Luo did not clarify whether he wrote the passage himself or it was an excerpt from other books. For example, he mentioned Lu Xun twice in this notebook, speaking highly of Lu Xun's revolutionary spirit. In the first passage, he wrote, "How much work can a man do within a lifetime, a year, a month or a day? Lu Xun gave a resounding answer to this question with his revolutionary spirit which is to seize the day. He built a pyramid of literature with over seven million words and left his mark on in the history." After citing "So many deeds cry out to be done, and all are urgent. The world rolls on, time presses. Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour!(多少事, 从来急; 天地转, 光阴迫。一万年太久, 只争朝夕)" from Mao Zedong's 1963 poem "Reply to Comrade Guo Moruo," Luo continued to write, "Time is life. Time is steel. Time is food. Time is victory. Let us carry forward Lu Xun's revolutionary spirit to seize the day. Let us cherish time, fight for time, and contribute our best to realize the goal of this new era." Luo's interpretation of Lu Xun in this passage follows the official state evaluation of Lu Xun in the Mao era. As Xiaobing Tang analyzes in his study of modern Chinese literature, the official evaluation of Lu Xun as a revolutionary realist came in the 1950s and made Lu Xun serviceable to the CCP.¹⁹ Interpreting Lu Xun as

¹⁹ Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 61.

a revolutionary realist who unveils the cannibalistic nature of Chinese feudal society helped to legitimize the Communist regime, and the state actively promoted this image to the general public.

Whether or not Luo wrote this passage himself or transcribed it from other reading materials he came across is not important for our interpretation. Luo must have internalized the state narrative about Lu Xun if he wrote this passage himself. If he copied it from somewhere else, he must have found resonance reading this passage. Both possibility allude to the point that the state succeeded in imposing its official narrative onto individuals. And sometimes the imposition was so subtle that the individuals might not even recognize the state influence in their own thinking and writings.

Apart from the infiltration of the state narrative into Luo's personal writing, his notebooks are also closely connected to his memoir. As we discussed earlier, Luo resorted to the almanacs when he was writing his memoir in his sixties. Similarly, Luo also used his notebooks as an information source for his memoir. For example, in the notebook where he kept records of building his new house in 1993, he transcribed one passage which he had written in October 1988. As he wrote, "At 5pm October 16th 1988, my telephone (number is 4170363) rang. This is a moment I will never forget. I remember that when Chairman Mao Zedong established new China, he called on all Chinese people and Chinese soldiers to work diligently in defiance together and to realize the Communist goal. At that time, he said that we would have lights and telephones in our homes in the future. Today, Chairman Mao's great dream is finally achieved! It is all due to Chairman Mao's greatness and insightfulness." His memoir repeated these words almost exactly.

The Memoir

China scholars started to study Chinese autobiographies and memoirs in the 1990s.²⁰ Although recent years have seen an increasing publication of memoirs written in the post-Mao era about Mao-era experiences, few of them were written by peasants.²¹ Luo's unpublished memoir stands out and provides us a precious opportunity to see historical changes over the past fifty years from a peasant's perspective. More importantly, Luo's memoir documents how Luo thought of himself and his past towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, when he was gradually approaching the end of his life and trying to make sense of the past and the present. As suggested by Mark Freeman, "a life history, rather than being a natural way of accounting for the self, is one that is thoroughly enmeshed within a specific and unique form of discourse and understanding," and a memoir is essentially "an imaginative story we weave out of those entangled threads we believe to be responsible for the texture of our lives."²² We will explore how Luo reinterpret his past and reconstruct his identity.

Luo's memoir is about 100 pages long and is written on memo paper with the title of Jiande Qintang Miaoqian Village Committee(建德市钦堂乡庙前村民委员会). By the time Yoshifumi Sato and his team found this memoir, Luo had already been working on it for years but had neither the intention nor the resources needed to have it published. According to the interview, Luo first started writing this memoir after he

²⁰ For studies of Chinese autobiographies, see Henrietta Harrison's *The Man Awakened from Dreams: One Man's Life in North China Village, 1857-1942*, Peiyi Wu's *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China*, and Lingzhen Wang's *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth Century China*.

²¹ Another example is Huiqin Chen's *Daughter of Good Fortune: A Twentieth-Century Chinese Peasant Memoir*.

²² Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), 28-30.

stopped working in 2009. By that time, he was living with his son Luo Guangyao's family in a two-storey house in Miaoqian village.

One question we must look into before we move on to discuss the content of the memoir is the intention of writing it. In order to better understand the nature of Luo's memoir, we should first examine its intended audience. As historians and writers, we know that people always have a specific audience in mind to whom they want to speak with their writing and both the writing style and the content partly depend on that specific audience. Luo's memoir is different from most of published memoirs, especially those originally published in English for Western audiences. As David Ashley points out in his study of the Red Guard generation's memory of the Cultural Revolution, many memoirs about socialist China published outside of China were written by "privileged offspring of high-ranking Party officials or by children of members of the pre-revolutionary political or business elites, who were able to leave for the West at a very early stage." And as Ashley argues, these memoirs were written and edited for Western audiences, such that they seldom challenge dominant Western perceptions of the Cultural Revolution.²³ With no intention and no connections to publish his memoir, not to say write it for the Western readers, Luo's memoir serves more as a personal reflection on his life, which he intended to share only with family members.

As for his intention in writing this memoir, there are two main factors contributing to the decision. First of all, Luo is very conscious about himself. He summarized his life experience towards the end of his memoir. He wrote that "I am an

²³ Yarong Jiang and David Ashley, *Mao's Children in the New China: Voices from the Red Guard Generation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

ordinary peasant who is in his 70s. Everyone has his own experience and goes through vicissitudes of life. In summary, I have three near-death experiences, three missed opportunities to realize upward mobility, three lessons to live by and three don'ts." By summarizing his life this way, Luo presents himself as a self-disciplined person whose talents are unrecognized. Writing a memoir helps him to deal with his disappointment. For Li, writing his memoir was a form of what Lingzhen Wang has called "self-writing" and "self-gazing"²⁴: it produced comfort, pleasures, and a kind of emotional catharsis that allowed him to reconcile himself with the past and the present.

Apart from that, he is also concerned with his family history. In 2015, he wrote a genealogy to document the history of his family. In the preface he wrote, "In 1978, 1060 villagers from Luo village, Banwu village and Baipipo village were forced to migrate to other villages in Qiantan county due to the reservoir construction. During the Cultural Revolution, the genealogy of Luo family was destroyed. I am afraid that the descendants of our kin will not be able to recognize each other in the future. I write this genealogy for descendants of the Luo family based on the information I gathered, in order to remind them of the family history and remind them to care for their kinfolk. PS, this genealogy is for descendants' reference. I hope that at every future winter solstice the descendants will make edits to this genealogy should any change occur, so that they can pass it down to their descendants and never forget the history." Apart from that, he was also actively involved in organizing former villagers from Luo village to document and honor the history of the village. Both examples

²⁴ Lingzhen Wang, *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 179.

indicate Luo's strong intention to preserve and pass down family history. Therefore, arguably Luo wrote about his own experience under the impulse to preserve it as a part of history.

Similar to the almanacs and the notebooks, Luo's memoir combines the state narrative with his personal narrative. This memoir consists of four parts, in chronological order. The first part was about his life from 1940 to 1950, and the second described his experience from 1951 to 1960. He continued to reflect on his life from 1961 to 1978 in the third part, and the fourth documented his life in the reform era.

It is noteworthy that his division of his life in the memoir is solely based on his family's movements. On the first page of his manuscript, he provided a very brief outline of the memoir. From the outline, we learn that his family moved from Luo village to Qintang village in 1951. He moved back to Luo village and married his wife in 1961 and in 1978 he was forced to move to Miaoqian village because of the reservoir construction in Luo village. These three moves marked four periods of his life, and in the outline he emphasized specific events in each of the four periods. Studying in primary school was the focus in the first part; "Liberation" in 1951 and being dismissed from Jiande Secondary Forestry School was highlighted in the second part; his marriage, the building of his own house, and the death of his wife were emphasized in the third part; and the fourth part underlined the building of his new house in Tangxia village, his experience with privatization in the Reform Era, and his participation in three rounds of the national census. The criteria for dividing periods is personal and unique in that it does not follow the national narrative, which uses major historical events such as the founding of the PRC, collectivization, the

Great Leap Forward and the famine, the Cultural Revolution, and Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" (gaige kaifang) as dividing points.

The fact that he used changes in his household as dividing points suggests two things. First of all, in his mind, place served as a primary marker for life. Moving to a new community, building a new house, and forming new relationships with villagers played vital roles in his life. Secondly, although he lived in a turbulent period and was directly affected, he did not focus on the national narrative. Just as Gail Hershatter nicely articulates in her study of the gendered memory of socialist China, "although national policy had profound effects on rural life, what was remembered – or forgotten – was determined not by reference to national development goals, but by the changes wrought in domestic arrangement."²⁵

Although Luo used his family movements as the framework of his memoir, he constantly brought up national events in his writing to explain his life changes. For example, in the first chapter, Luo wrote, "Since Land Reform, poor peasants are filled with merriment. Children participated in the local Children's Corps; youth joined militia; everybody does the yangge dance.²⁶ We are so happy. My eldest sister was born on April 30th 1951 according to Chinese lunar calendar. My father was weeding the land when my eldest sister was born, and therefore named her "laughter weeding" (*xiaoyun*, 笑耘) as a testimony to the land gained during the reform." As already noted by Shuyu Kong, family narrative is always intertwined with national

²⁵ Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 26.

²⁶ Yangge dance is a form of Chinese folk dance. In 1940s and 1950s, Yangge dance was used as a political tool to disseminate socialist images. For study of the Yangge dance in the early PRC, see Chang-tai Hung's "The Dance of Revolution: Yangge in Beijing in the Early 1950s."

narrative in memoirs.²⁷ And as we will see in the following sections, even though Luo digressed from the national narrative multiple times, he still situated himself in the national framework, emphasizing his place in the state.

Luo's focus on the changes of his household and his narrative in the memoir also allude to the connection among the pre-liberation era, the Mao era and the post-Mao era. Scholars tend to study each period separately and take the periodization for granted. However, as suggested in Luo's account, there exists continuity among different periodization and in order to better understand the PRC as lived by the individual, scholars should pay more attention to the similarities of different period and the nuanced experience of different individuals.

²⁷ Shuyu Kong, "Swan and Spider Eater in Problematic Memoirs of Cultural Revolution," *East Asia Cultures Critique* 7, no. 2 (1999), 239-252.

CHAPTER II

MEMORY AND NARRATIVE

The issue of memory has received plenty of attention from psychologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, and historians in the past several decades.²⁸ One popular explanation of the working mechanism of memory is that it does not merely have to do with recounting the past events, but is also involved in reinterpreting and making sense of it. Reliving and reinterpreting the past shaped our identities. Therefore, just as with memory, our identity is not fixed. As Maurice Halbwach articulates, “We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives and these are continually reproduced through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated. But precisely because these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in different systems of notions, at different periods in our lives, they have lost the form and the appearance they once had.”²⁹ Luo’s personal writing in different periods of his life enables us to see how reliving the past shaped his identity and his narratives. Our job is not to pick out the uncontaminated memory that represents what truly happened in the past (and it is impossible to find uncontaminated memory and narratives no matter how badly we long for that), but to keep track of what has changed over time and interpret it through Luo’s history. Apart from tracing the alteration in Luo’s narrative, I also attempt to disentangle the mix of the state narrative and the personal narrative in Luo’s writings. By examining Luo’s writings on his education, his intimate relationship with his wife, his work and

²⁸ For memory study see Maurice Halbwach’s *On Collective Memory*, Jacques Le Goff’s *History and Memory* and Mark Freeman’s *Rewriting the Self*.

²⁹ Maurice Halbwach, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 47.

his political perspectives, this chapter reveals the way Luo appropriated national narratives to construct his version of history and build up his own identity

Writings on Education

“Our country was suffering from the three years of great famine in 1960. The county Party committee decided to streamline the students in our school (Jiande Primary School of Forestry) and send us back to our villages to support agricultural production. The memory of the day when we said goodbye to each other is still vivid in my mind. All the teachers and students cried, because we all desired to contribute to our country. We labored and learned knowledge to prepare ourselves to become qualified forestry soldiers (linye zhanshi, 林业战士). As a response to the call from the country and to undertake difficulty for our country, we bore the pain and gave up on our ambitious future goals, and said goodbye to each other on September 18th, 1960.” This is a part of Luo Jiaxiong’s letter to Jiande Labor and Social Security Bureau, written in December 2011. Four months earlier, Jiande Labor and Social Security Bureau issued an announcement to provide financial aid to those who were streamlined from urban institutions in the 1960s in response to the call from the CCP to support agricultural production in the countryside. Luo was disappointed to find out that he and his former classmates were not considered qualified to get financial aid from the government.

As a response, he sent this letter to the bureau hoping that they would be added to the list. He believed that he should also be considered as a former urban employee who got streamlined and sent back. As he writes in this letter, “We were students in name, but in fact we worked as employees of Jiande Forestry Station (*Jiande*

linchang, 建德林场). On the one hand, we went to school for knowledge. On the other hand, we also went to school so that we could better serve the country.” This letter, however, did not bring him the news he had been longing to hear. Not surprisingly, his letter has been transferred back and forth between different government departments. Three months later, when he finally heard back from Jiande Labor Bureau, he was told that according to provincial policy, those who discontinued their studies in the early 1960s could not receive financial assistance.

Not satisfied with this answer, Luo assembled five other former classmates in 2012 to write another joint letter to the government asking for reconsideration. They wrote, “We would have been able to draw our pension if it were not for the streamlining in 1960. Our future was ruined by the situation then, and how come we should live like criminals today without enjoying the benefits?” This joint letter, just as the last one, did not win them a favorable result. In 2015, when I was doing field work in Jiande for my undergraduate thesis, Lin Fazhang, Luo’s former classmate in the forestry school asked me to accompany him to Jiande Labor Bureau to talk to the director, hoping that having an “intellectual” by his side, he might get a favorable answer this time. As he reasoned, if it was not for the streamlining, he and his classmates would have had urban hukous and enjoyed the same benefits as urban citizens.

The way both Lin and Luo see their identity and experience as former students in the forestry school today is different from their understanding in 1959 and different from Luo’s understanding when he was writing his memoir few years earlier. Before we tackle the difference, let us take a closer look at the forestry school. During the Great Leap Forward, the CCP attempted to combine education with labor on a

massive scale. Under the general line of socialist construction which directed people to “go all out, aim high, and build socialism with greater, faster, better, and more economical results,” the county-owned Jiande Forestry Station established Jiande Primary School of Forestry in August 1958. According to the report of the forestry school in February 9th, 1959, the school mission was to train “both red and expert” (*youhong youzhuang*, 又红又专) technicians to disseminate forestry production knowledge and practices throughout the county.³⁰ As envisioned by the county and the forestry station in 1958, graduates from the school had three future options; they could go back to the commune as forestry technicians; some of them could become technical workers in the forestry station; and a few students with great scores could go on to study in a secondary forestry school.³¹

This school was one of the 22 work-study agricultural schools (among which two were forestry schools) running in 1959.³² Like other work-study schools, the forestry school was founded in a hurry and with obstacles. It failed the mission of recruiting 50 students in the first semester and only had one teacher from a public school for seven weeks. The school also did not have a proper classroom, a decent dormitory or even enough teaching appliances in the beginning, such that the students used the abandoned temple as their classroom and slept on the floor in a vacant house. Under such an arduous living environment, it came as no surprise that students would want to quit school. In order to dissuade students from quitting, the school spent much time

³⁰ Linye Zhongxue, “Guanyu Baosong Xueqi Gongzuo Zongjie de Baogao,” Jiande Linchang, 127-1-44, 2, Jiande Municipal Archive.

³¹ Linye Zhongxue, “Guanyu Baosong Xueqi Gongzuo Zongjie de Baogao,” Jiande Linchang, 127-1-44, 2, Jiande Municipal Archive.

³² Wenjiao Ju, “Jiandexian Nongye Zhongxue Xianchang Huiyi Qingkuang Zongjie Baogao,” Jiandexian Jiaoyu Weiyuanhui, 30-1-178, 1, Jiande Municipal Archive.

explaining the advantage of studying in a work-study school and carrying out political education, including the airing of views, writing big character posts, and debating.³³

The emphasis on the advantage of studying in the school and political education proved effective. According to two reports of the forestry school in 1958 and 1959, the number of complaints has decreased among enrolled students and they built up close relations with their classmates. While there might exist certain exaggeration in the report, the growing number of enrolled students in 1960 nevertheless testifies to the improving image of the forestry school among peasants.

Thanks to successful political education, the promotion of the school among villagers, and the improvement in the teaching and living condition of the forestry school, 1959 saw an increased enrollment at the forestry school. In April 1959, the school was moved into the former office of the Agriculture and Water Conservancy Bureau and received 325 RMB to renovate the abandoned office³⁴ and another 800 RMB to buy new desks and beds.³⁵ Different from the enrollment system in 1958 which was based on recommendation from each village (*xiang*, 乡), students were enrolled based on their examination performance and class identification. In total, 120 people took the exam, among whom 45 were admitted. Luo Jiaxiong was one of the admitted students.

Luo started school in September 1959 and was sent back to his village in September 1960. During his time in school, he kept writing letters to his future-wife

³³ Linye Zhongxue, "Guanyu Baosong Xueqi Gongzuo Zongjie de Baogao," Jiande Linchang 127-1-44, 3, Jiande Municipal Archive.

³⁴ Linye Zhongxue, "Guanyu Baosong Xueqi Gongzuo Zongjie de Baogao," Jiande Linchang 127-1-44, 35, Jiande Municipal Archive.

³⁵ Linye Zhongxue, "Guanyu Baosong Xueqi Gongzuo Zongjie de Baogao," Jiande Linchang 127-1-44, 36, Jiande Municipal Archive.

Yunxian. In almost every letter sent to her, he would bring up his life in the forestry school and express his enthusiasm for study. He was very proud to be a student in the forestry school and seemed to genuinely believe in his bright future as a graduate from the school. For example, in his letter written on February 13rd 1960, he wrote, “The country is developing rapidly and aims to mechanize and electrify in all industrial and agricultural industries soon. However, there is not enough technical personnel. Therefore, the country is now carrying forward revolution in both technology and culture and is invested in the acceleration of cultivating more technical personnel to construct the nation. Due to this development situation, instead of finishing junior school in three years, we might need to finish high school study within three years, which means we have to learn twice as much as we were supposed to. How hard and tiring will this be? Not to mention we have to labor as usual. But we have to overcome all these difficulties by ourselves.” From his eagerness to explain the potential change to his illiterate girlfriend, we can see his excitement and positive expectation of his future. In another letter written on March 3rd 1960, he explained school consolidation and relocation to Yunxian. The forestry school merged with another school and was named Technical School for Agriculture and Forestry. The school was moved to an experimental farmland in Yuhe, Xiananjiang.³⁶ Luo was excited about the consolidation and the relocation, saying that this relocation manifested the Party’s solicitude for the students. and it was to help them better study and labor, and master more advanced technologies.

Four decades later, when Luo was writing about his days in the forestry school in

³⁶ Linye Zhongxue, “Guanyu Baosong Xueqi Gongzuo Zongjie de Baogao,” Jiande Linchang 127-1-44, 42, Jiande Municipal Archive.

his memoir, he emphasized his identity as a student and stressed his thirst for knowledge and school. As he wrote in the memoir, “As I grew older, my thirst for knowledge grew as well. Therefore, I took the entrance examinations to both the Speed-up Normal School and the Forestry School in Meicheng in 1959. I only got admitted to the Forestry School.” He continued to emphasize how hard-working he was in school. “I was already twenty then and longed for more knowledge, so I stayed really attentive in class and took detailed notes. Whenever there was a puzzle, I would not eat until I figured it out.”

Different from this overflowing sense of pride in being a student and future talents, Luo talked about this relocation experience in a less positive tone in his letter to the government body in 2011. As he wrote, “in 1960, the county Party committee established a county experimental farmland in Yuhe village, Xinanjiang. Our school was relocated from Meicheng to Yuhe, and we labored for three months in that experimental farmland. In the same year, under the county Party committee’s arrangement, our class was relocated to the nursery garden in Dalushang, Qiantan. In short, we were assigned wherever they needed us. During the seed production season, we were also assigned tasks to collect seeds and dry them. We collected several thousand jin of fine cedar seeds despite rainy weather and contributed greatly to the national forestry industry.” As we can see, Luo took drastically different views on his experience in the forestry school. He took relocation and working in an experimental farmland as a learning opportunity in 1960 whereas in 2011 he saw it as an exploitation of their labors.

Not only did he think of his experience as a student differently over time, he also developed nuanced understandings of the relationship between labor and study. He

mentioned labor several times in his letter to Yunxian in 1959 and 1960. In these letters, he sometimes implied his dissatisfaction with working too much and not having enough time to study. For example, in his letter written on March 11st 1960, he wrote, “We have been laboring since we relocated to this place and have not had time to study yet.” In an earlier letter he wrote, “Our school might become a full-time school next year. The country will be supporting us financially and we do not have to labor anymore. We feel so happy but worried at the same time about this.” As we learn from these letters, he valued study more than labor and was excited to learn that they might be supported financially to study without having to work anymore. Luo expressed his opinion on the relation between labor and study more explicitly in his memoir. As discussed earlier, the memoir emphasizes his identity as a student. When he moves on to talk about his life in Dalushang, he claims that “we were assigned to collect cedar seeds in the winter time. We were all enthusiastic about it. To labor is to study better.” While Luo had experienced hardship from laboring and had even hinted his complaints in the letters, he understated his laboring experience in the memoir so that he could portrait himself as a young adult who was longing to become an intellectual. Tellingly, although it was stated in the school mission and the political education that the school is to train laborers with socialist consciousness and knowledge, Luo omitted the laborer part but only focused on the knowledge.

However, as he tried to fight for financial aid from the government in 2011, he depicted himself as a laborer more than a student. “We labored during the day and studied at night. We labored in sunny days and studied in rainy and snowy days. We mainly labored in the Jiande Forestry Station.” Without mentioning any of his gain from studying, he portrayed himself as being exploited by the burdensome labor

tasks. If we look at how Luo and his classmates thought about being a laborer and working for the country back in 1960 when they were dismissed from school, we will notice that although some of them felt disappointed about the streamlining, most of them expressed their pride in becoming a laborer and contributing to the agricultural production. For example, his classmate Ailian wrote in the farewell comments book, “I hope you will labor diligently and devote your youth to the country!” Another classmate Zhou Jiashu wrote, “I hope you will temper yourself like steel through labor and become a man with multiple abilities (*duomian shou*, 多面手).”

The difference over time speaks to the point that the way an individual portrays himself is fluid according to his current situations. We notice how Luo and his classmates conformed the state narrative in 1960 and how they attempted to win benefits for themselves by resisting the very same national narrative fifty years later. As James C. Scott argues in his study of everyday forms of resistance in rural Malaysia, conformity is well-calculated and a “self-conscious strategy” while resistance is also carefully calculated as not to cause “all-or-nothing confrontations.”³⁷ Arguably, Luo and his classmates had no other choice but to follow the state narrative when they were sent back from school to countryside in the midst of the famine. They could not afford to openly criticize the policy or express any form of discontent. Therefore, they either emphasized their great affections and how they were loath to part with each other or spoke highly of their future as described by the central state. A half century later, when they had already experienced hardships and stayed at the bottom of the society, they had nothing to lose. Therefore, they gathered together to

³⁷ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 285.

fight for their rights even if it ended in vain.

Writings on Intimate Relationship

Intimacy was of great importance to Luo when he reflected on his life, as suggested by the space Luo dedicated to his romantic relationship with his wife in the memoir and several other short pieces he wrote in the notebook “Peony”. Luo recalled many details in the memoir about the love between him and his wife, who passed away at the age of 35 in 1975. Four decades after Yunxian’s death, by reading Luo’s words we can still sense his love for her and the sorrow he felt after her death.

According to Luo’s memoir he fell in love with Yunxian in the first half of 1959 before he went to study at Jiande Primary Forestry School. He asked his uncle to do the match-making and got engaged to her in 1959. He kept writing to Yunxian before their marriage in 1962.

Judith Farquhar has argued that in the Chinese countryside, “shared cooking, bathing, and toilet facilities combined with the intensive demands of the collective on each person’s waking time shrink the sphere of the private and the personal to a negligible level.”³⁸ While Farquhar is right to identify that the system of collectivization demanded more time working with others, Luo’s love letters and the entries he kept in his “Peony” testify to a greater importance of privacy, intimacy, and family than Farquhar’s analysis would suggest. Yunxiang Yan points out in his study of private life in socialist China that family was still the center of private life and a refuge for the individual.³⁹ As we can tell from Luo’s description of his romantic

³⁸ Judith Farquhar, “Technologies of Everyday Life: The Economy of Impotence in Reform China,” *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no.2 (1999), 168.

³⁹ Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.

relationship with Yunxian, he treasured the mutual support they had and the great effort they put into earning a better life under arduous circumstances. Family and intimacy provided a shelter for him from the upheavals associated with dramatic social changes in the 1960s and early 1970s, however, it also contributed to his suffering after Yunxian's death.

Luo's expression of love changed markedly in different situations and over time. He conveyed his love and concern for Yunxian in a restrained and oblique way in the letter sent to her in the collective era. He called her "sister Yunxian" or "dear sister Yunxian" in his letters, and signed them either "Xuechang" or "brother Xuechang".⁴⁰ Compared to words like "darling" or "love," calling one's lover sister or brother emphasizes family affection rather than love and romance, and suggests a more restrained expression. The most affectionate expressions he ever used in his letter were "I miss you" and "I feel miserable hearing the news that you wanted to break up with me." As Yan argues, people in Luo's generation were very subtle in expressing affection during courtship; most of the time, love and intimacy "were hinted at with words, body language and actions."⁴¹ Under strict social expectations regarding love and marriage, people in Luo's generation often held back their emotions or at least their expression of affection.⁴²

While Luo's restrained manner in the letter testifies to the above-mentioned

⁴⁰ The way Luo called his girlfriend as sister is not rare in China. Traces can be found in Chinese classical literature. Also in *Mao's Children in the New China*, one of the interviewees recalls her romantic relationship with her husband saying that "he began sending me love letters of brotherly advice, such as: 'Eat more. 'Don't exhaust yourself.'"

⁴¹ Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism*, 75.

⁴² Neil J. Diamant argues in his book *Revolutionizing the Family* that people from rural China enjoy a more open environment compared to their urban counterpart and in some ways, the open culture in rural area helped facilitate the state policy. Although it is also noticed in this study that people from rural area didn't have much ideological burden to express their love to others, they expressed somehow in a subtle and modest way.

conclusions, his expression in the notebook suggests a totally different picture. It is not clear when exactly he recorded these entries about his romantic relations with Yunxian in the notebook, but according to the content, he might have written it immediately after his marriage since his tone was extremely positive and did not mention Yunxian's illness and death once. In the notebook, he wrote, "On a spring day in 1959, I came to know this respected (敬爱的) girl. As time passed by, I became closer to her. As we grew into youth and cultivated mutual sympathy, we fell in love with each other." Different from his oblique voice in the love letters, he talked about love with great passion in this notebook which he kept to himself. He wrote, "Darling, I remember how I pledged to you that night. You have my undivided attention and I will love you forever. My feeling for you won't change even if the mountain falls and the earth shatters." The notebook mentioned that he kept writing to Yunxian while he was away studying in the forestry school. He wrote, "When I was in school that year, I kept thinking about you darling all the time. That's why I constantly wrote letters to you. It is a pity that you are illiterate. Even though I have so many sweet and intimate words to tell you, I can't let you know even a bit via the letters. I believe you must feel the same or even worse than I did." In most of the love letters, Luo would write, "I will talk to you more when I am back from school." He could not undisguisedly express his love for Yunxian in the letters, because Yunxian was illiterate and needed other people to read it to her. In that sense, the love letters were not private and in order to prevent people from gossiping and judging, Luo had no choice but to withhold his true feelings in the letters. But when it came to his private notebook, he wrote down his feelings in a straightforward manner. His expression of affection was not in line with the state expectation. During the Mao era, individuals were not

expected to express romantic affection but rather camaraderie. His restrained voice in the letters and undisguised expression in the notebook testify to the what James C. Scott would call “calculated conformity and resistance.”⁴³

In his memoir, Luo continued to express his love for Yunxian in the same way he did in the notebook. In the memoir, Luo referred to Yunxian as “my beloved wife” and constantly used the word “love.” He wrote, “I was so in love with her that people around me used to mock me by saying that I acted like I had never met any woman before in my whole life. I loved her so much that sometimes when I came home from work, I couldn’t resist kissing her on the face. It’s a pity that we only spent a dozen years together before she passed away. I would be more than willing to serve her three meals a day in bed and spend the rest of my life with her if only she were still alive.”

One difference from his writing in the notebook is that he wrote in an extremely positive light in the notebook whereas in the memoir he emphasized more on the misery. When he mentioned Yunxian in the memoir for the first time, he wrote, “I recall suffering in my life and Yunxian’s miserable life. She didn’t live a single day of good life before she passed away because of illness. She was born at the wrong time!” In the memoir Luo recalled the days when he and Yunxian were building their new house. He wrote, “Yunxian suffered a lot during that time. She was pregnant and had to take care of our daughter in the same time. She worked round the clock for our new house.” While he praised Yunxian for working hard and taking good care of the family, he also expressed his sorrow for all the suffering Yunxian has gone through and the sacrifices she has made for the family. Although Yunxian was the one who suffered from illness, her illness exacerbated Luo’s burden both financially and

⁴³ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 286.

psychologically. As he said, “I have been so lonely, but I have to be independent. Instead of crying all day, I force myself to smile and be optimistic. I manage to get along with other people, because my wife passed away and I had nobody to lean on to. Life is full of bitterness. Life of a man without a wife is even worse. I had to be both father and mother. It was lucky for me that the team allowed me to stay at home in the morning to take care of my kids and bring my lunch to work in the afternoon. Only in that way can I take care of both my family and my work in the same time. When the kids fall asleep at night, I always think to myself, life is so hard. I am still young and I have three kids to look after. How am I supposed to live my future life? Whenever I think of that my tears stream down my cheek.”. Again, we see how Luo’s narrative on a same issue changed over time as we did in the analysis of his writing on study. For Luo, every time he writes about his romantic relationship with Yunxian, he is engaging with a new situation and assigning new meanings to the relationship.

While we acknowledge Luo’s agency in expressing his affection for his wife in a way not welcomed in the Mao era in the 1960s, we should also pay attention to how his narrative in the memoir digresses from the state’s expectations about womanhood in the Mao era and follows instead the post-socialist ideal of womanhood. In his memoir, he pitied women, saying, “Women work too hard. They are born to serve their husbands and parents, and need to take care of their children. They need to be a good daughter-in-law, a good wife, and a good mother in the same time. Be it a sunny day or rainy day, they have work to do all day.” He also talked about the time Yunxian spent on domestic work. As he wrote, “Whenever Yunxian was available, she worked in the team as well to earn work points. She had to keep an eye on the pig and the chicken, while taking care of our daughter and son. In rainy days, she would make

clothes for the family. I remember that we were able to buy some cloth but we could not afford to hire a tailor. Because we were unable to pay the tailor wage, Yunxian learned to stitch and make clothes herself. She always stayed up late when she was making clothes for our son. I sometime woke up in the middle of the night and saw her still working. I told her to sleep and she replied I am almost finished and will sleep soon. However, she would still be awake stitching when I woke up again later.”

According to Gail Hershatter, while the revolutionary language of the collective period stipulated what women should do, it seldom if ever involved women’s daily life at home.⁴⁴ Luo’s description of the time Yunxian spent on domestic tasks serves well to replenish the uneven discourse on womanhood in the Mao era and make the invisible visible. Meanwhile, we should acknowledge the similarities between Luo’s description of Yunxian and the ideal of womanhood in the post-Mao era. He described Yunxian as a diligent, frugal, and wise wife and also a good mother. This description is similar to the discourse “good wife and wise mother” (*xianqi liangmu*, 賢妻良母) which was first brought up by the Japanese in the nineteenth century in order to cultivate modern female models for a modernized Japan and introduced to China in the late nineteenth century, and had a renaissance in the post-Mao era.⁴⁵

In general, Luo’s changing expression of love affection demonstrates both conformity with and digression from the changing national expectations and state narratives. Meanwhile, we see the influence the state has on the individual in shaping their perspectives and actions.

⁴⁴ Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 29.

⁴⁵ For discussion on “good wife, wise mother,” see, for example, Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter 1988, Kathleen S. Uno 1993, Sigrid Schmalzer 2008

Writings on Work

Luo was never well off financially in his life. However, his role as a brigade cadre brought him recognition and respect in the collective era, which was later lost when the country transitioned to a market economy. As Lingzhen Wang argues, writing is an action that interacts with life to build up the writer's identity and subjectivity in history.⁴⁶ In order to cope with what Judith Farquhar would call his "social impotence"⁴⁷ in the post-socialist era, Luo consciously omitted or highlighted certain events in the memoir to present a certain image of himself with which he was contented.

One of the best examples is his writing on his contribution to the national census. In the memoir, Luo did not write about his daily practice in the collective era (though he had kept great track of it in the almanacs), nor did he talk in detail about how he raised his children. Instead he stressed his contribution to the national census in 1990 and 2000, and specifically highlighted the fact that his work had received state acknowledgement and reward. He wrote, "Because of my accomplishment in the ID card registration in 1987, local officials allowed me to participate in the fourth national census as well. This time I was assigned to a small area. Based on my previous working experience, I carefully carried out the publicity work and after a few months of investigation and verification I finished my task on time. I was awarded a certificate of honor and a watch (there were only three watches awarded in the whole county)."

As a reward for his contribution to the fifth national census, he received another

⁴⁶ Wang, *Personal Matters*, 11.

⁴⁷ Farquhar, "Technologies and Everyday Life," 156

certificate of honor and a bed quilt. He noted that “although not expensive, the rewards represent the acknowledgement of my work and mean so much to me.” In contrast to his digression from the national narrative in the structuring of his memoir, Luo relied on his contribution to the state and the recognition from the state to construct his identity and value of life. While he adopted a timeline in the memoir unique to his own life, he still situated himself within the national framework and emphasized his connection with national affairs.

Luo’s understanding of the mass line and his usage of it further reveals that while he adopted personal events as markers for life in the memoir, he was deeply influenced by the national discourse and his writing in the post-Mao era conformed to the ideology in the Mao era. The idea of the mass line was incessantly promoted by the Chinese Communist Party⁴⁸, and ultimately became a part of Luo’s vocabulary and worldview. In his description of the work and the learned lessons he learned in the national census, he specifically raised the idea of mass line. He wrote, “I learned from my working experience that in order to get things done in the country, one must have good propaganda work among the masses to mobilize them. The masses must all hear about the national census and fully understand the importance of the work. One also should mingle with the masses and take special care of the old, the disabled, and people who have difficulties in their lives, so that the masses will think highly of you. Only in this way can you finish your work successfully and therefore earn the endorsement and support of the masses.”

His description matches the propaganda languages promoted by the state. “We must adhere to mass line. Rely on the masses; believe in the masses; fully mobilize

⁴⁸ Graham Young, “On the Mass Line,” *Modern China* 6, no.2 (1980), 225-240.

the masses.” At the same time, however, we need to take a closer look at Luo’s understanding and use of the mass line in the memoir. As argued by Graham Young, “Party leadership is central in Mao’s conception of the mass line.”⁴⁹ While the state policy acknowledged the masses’ creativity and contribution to revolutionary changes, it stressed the role of the central Party and Party cadres in making wise decisions. In Luo’s version, however, the local government and cadres’ importance is missing. Rather than explicitly challenging the meaning of mass line, Luo simply emphasized one specific aspect of the concept while sidestepping another. The highlights of his contribution to the state to claim his social status and the appropriation of the state narrative from the Mao era to legitimize his work in the post-Mao era reveal the fluidity and the essence of conformity: individuals do not just conform to one national narrative (past or present), they appropriate national narratives according to their needs.

This example also helps us better understand how ideology works among individuals. As Joseph Hellbeck puts forward, instead of seeing ideology as a fixed and monologic text, it is better to understand it as “a ferment working in individuals and producing a great deal of variation as it interacts with the subjectivity life of a particular person.”⁵⁰ That means, an individual internalizes part of the ideology and makes it a part of his own identity during the process of interpreting of the ideology. And it is through the internalization, that the ideology per se comes to its life. In Luo’s case, the mass line was first imposed upon him in the Mao era. With his unique understanding and use of the mass line in his work in the post-Mao era, ideology from

⁴⁹ Young, “On the Mass Line,” 225-240.

⁵⁰ Joseph Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 13.

the Mao era was brought out again and gained new significance to Luo.

Writings on Political Perspectives

One of the most striking voices Luo adopts in his memoir is his explicit praise for Chairman Mao and his resentment of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. He wrote, “Immediately after the demise of Chairman Mao, that short guy Deng Xiaoping came into power and took drastic revenge under the disguise of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The policy of reform and opening up seemed to bring an economical boost, but in fact it did huge harm to the nation.” He also demonstrated his discontent with the leadership of Jiang Zemin, saying, “Jiang followed Deng’s capitalist path. The so-called policy of reform and opening up is in fact privatizing all the collective industries and collective systems built up by Chairman Mao and thus forcing the masses to be the slaves of bosses and be exploited by them.” All he saw in Deng and Jiang’s administrations was social injustice.

Luo did notice the improvement in his own living circumstance, but he did not attributed it to the institutional reforms led by Deng. Tellingly, he thanked Mao after he bought a telephone in 1998. He was born and raised in Mao’s era, and the education he received in socialist China helped form the value system and worldview he then used to explain the phenomena he later observed in post-socialist China. According to his memoir, he worked several different jobs since the onset of Deng’s reforms, and none of the jobs made him wealthy or brought him higher social status. Meanwhile, he witnessed how other people used their personal connections to get promoted and gain greater benefits. He wrote, “We were on the road to achieve common prosperity in Mao’s era. You could do well economically as long as you were diligent enough. However, in today’s society where we follow the capitalist

path, you must have all kinds of skills to survive.” From Luo’s expression of dissatisfaction, we see how he conforms to the state ideology in the Mao era in order to express the discontent with his current life situation. As with his choice of not following the state narrative on the periodization of history in the PRC, this resentment is also a digression from the national narrative embraced by the public today. Gail Hershatter has observed similar nostalgia in her interview with rural women in Shaanxi province. As she writes, “Older rural women understand themselves to have benefited from the subsequent economic reforms, yet simultaneously to have been disadvantaged by them.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 31.

EPILOGUE

When we first interviewed Luo in 2015, he had no intention to and no connections with which to publish his memoir. Unlike many published memoirs of the socialist era, Luo's writing began as a personal reflection and an effort to preserve his history and the family history, to be shared only with family members, rather than a commodity to be marketed or an effort to influence readers (Chinese or Westerners). Neither was this memoir a "weapon of the weak" to resist authority and therefore "subvert power."⁵² Hue-Tam Ho Tai has argued in his study of memory in late socialist Vietnam, while it is possible and tempting to study memory and "countermemory" through the analytical lenses of hegemony and "counterhegemony," the Vietnamese case "raise(s) issues that are far more complex than a simple story of tension and opposition might suggest."⁵³ Similarly, Luo's personal writing, especially his memoir and other pieces in commemoration of his family members, should not be taken as granted as his effort to resist the state authority and claim his agency.

Realizing the preciousness and the importance of Luo's memoir and other personal writings, Yoshifumi Sato decided to publish the memoir in Chinese in Japan. When Sato and his team went back to Luo in 2016 with the manuscript for proofing, Luo asked Sato to delete his criticism of Deng Xiaoping saying that "home truth is best kept at home" (*jiachou buke waiyang*, 家丑不可外扬). Luo also said that he would like to keep this part if the memoir were going to be published in China because the criticism reflected his true thoughts (though it is highly unlikely that any

⁵² Guobin Yang, "Days of Old Are Not Puffs of Smoke: Three Hypotheses on Collective Memories of the Cultural Revolution," *The China Review* 5, no.2 (2005), 13-41. Also see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

⁵³ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Introduction: Situating Memory," in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tan Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 7.

press in China would be willing to publish this memoir with the criticism of Deng and Jiang considering the potential political consequences). The fact that Luo wants to keep the criticism if it were going to be published in China suggests two things. First of all, he does not understand or has not thought about censorship and the political consequences of criticizing state leaders in public. Secondly, and more importantly for our understanding of his memoir, he has no intention to use it as a weapon to challenge the leadership at all; otherwise, he would be more cautious about his decisions. More importantly, as we can tell from Luo's decision to delete the criticism, he does not want to present a negative image of China to Japan even if he is not contented with his living situations in China today.

The edits made for the published version create a new layer in Luo's life story and will further complicate our understanding of the interactions between the state and the individual. As we see from the manuscript, Luo appropriated the changing state narratives to construct his version of history to make sense of his life and all the changes that had happened. Luo stuck neither with the state narrative from the Mao era nor that from the post-Mao era; in that way, he was able to make the best of the state narrative to work out his perception of life. The fluidity of which narrative to conform to or digress from suggests active manipulation. Meanwhile, we should not rush to conclude that the individual always lies in opposition to the state. As we learn from Luo's case, the relationship between the state and the individual is more than submission or resistance; it is also about calculated conformity and digression. And there are times when Luo was not able to distinguish state narratives from his personal narratives. While conformity and digression acknowledge the individual agency, they do not necessarily put the state and the individual in an opposing

position. As we learn from Luo's decision to remove the criticism and the highlights of his contribution to the state, although he is not contented with the state, he still embraces the state and situate himself in the framework of the state.

Luo summarized his life in the genealogy, "I am a man with integrity and kindness; I am selfless man and ready to help others; I am a diligent man. With no tile on the roof and no ground beneath us, my wife and I were industrious and frugal and we worked with one heart to fight with the miserable life. I lost my wife when I was still young and had to raise my children alone. I have had a lifetime of frustrations. I was born in a wrong time with unrecognized talents and virtues. (为人正直，心地善良；毫不利己，乐于助人；勤勤恳恳，忠心耿耿。上无片瓦，下无寸地；夫妻同心，艰苦挣扎；克勤克俭，白手起家。早年丧妻，扶幼带小；一生坎坷，命运不济；性不适时，一身清贫。)" In his reflection, Luo blamed the fate rather than state policy for making his life miserable. After all, for Luo, a semi-intellectual peasant, who has experienced ups and downs in the Mao era and post-Mao era, state policy and the social changes brought by it are the synonyms of fugitive destiny.

Luo Xuechang is a miniature of educated Chinese peasants who spent their youth and young adulthood in the Mao era and lived their middle age and old age in the post-Mao era. Luo's personal writings captured numerous significant moments of his life within the background of dramatic social transformations. The tension between the state-directed changes and Luo's lived experience and the tension between the state-promoted official narratives and his personal narratives allow historians to better understand China and Chinese peasants in the second half of the twenty-first century.

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